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## The Filaments of a World Mission

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**A**n article in the *New York Times* this fall announced that three Princeton astrophysicists have found evidence that galaxies "are not randomly clustered through the universe, as science long believed, but are arranged in a pattern of filaments, like gigantic spiders strung out on cosmic webs." One of them added that if the research "turns out right" and this filamentary structure is not an optical illusion but real, it will "tell us with certainty" that the galaxies could not have been distributed by chance but by a "coherent" event.

I am not going to claim that last year's publication of the *World Christian Encyclopedia* is a scientific break-through on quite the same shattering astrophysical scale. That would be pretentious. It does not even pretend to be the first to discern quantifiable trends and connections in global Christianity. But it does occur to me that the fourteen-year labor of identifying, measuring and describing what appear to be some basic filamentary structures of Christian expansion and decline in the world of religions in the 20th century has as much of a note of challenge to further research in the field of missiology as the new galactic studies present to cosmologists.

Will the *Encyclopedia's* broad, brush-stroke portrait of the Christian world in today's context prove to be accurate enough to be called real? That is up to missiologists to affirm or disprove before the next edition comes out. And if it is real, how does that change our world perspectives? This much at least is sure: as a ready reference book for research and teaching it has no equal.

I am not going to attempt a review of the volume. That will be done by others. Rather, as requested, I will simply respond in a personal way to such a question as "How does the vast amount of new material gathered together here influence me in my teaching of missions and ecumenics?"

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### A New Type of Ecumenicity

In the first place, it has already taken some of the guesswork and mythology out of the easy, the often misleading generalizations into which I am tempted when speaking about the world church. It has added new standards of definition and accuracy to my thinking about the world mission of the church. For example, most mainline denominational ecumenicity of the 1960s was serenely unaware, even into the 1970s, that it represented a diminishing sector of world-wide Protestantism, and an even smaller share of the cutting edge of Protestant evangelistic and missionary outreach. We were proud that 200 churches were members of the World Council of Churches, and that the Council had added an Orthodox dimension to its ecumenical vision and an evangelistic dimension to its missionary structure at New Delhi in 1961. The number of member churches would soon grow to 300, making the WCC still the only genuinely *ecumenical* ecclesiastical organization in Christendom outside the communion of Rome, at least in the root meaning of "ecumenical."

But I now find from the *Encyclopedia* that 300 churches do not a "world church council" make — not when there are in fact some 20,000 denominations in the world, four times as many as we had estimated only twenty years ago. Five new church denominations are formed every week, on the average, and almost all of them are non-conciliar (pp. 3, 17). The encouraging growth of conciliar connectionalism (Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox and evangelical) however is not overlooked. It is as carefully documented as the sobering facts of Christian division. Ecumenists can find cheer in the array of charts on "confessional conciliarism," "world conciliarism," "continental conciliarism," "national conciliarism" and even "non-conciliarism" in Global Table 28 (p. 794). At the beginning of this century there were no nationwide transconfessional councils. Today there is a "vast network of some 550" such national councils spread across the world.

But other statistics call for sober inquiry. Why are 144 million church members still unrelated to any world or international council of Christians, and why, since 1970, has this number of the unrelated been growing at a considerably faster rate than the membership of churches related either to the World Council of Churches or the Synod of Bishops (Roman), particularly in the so-called third world. The growth figures for the ten years between 1970 and 1980 are: 27% in churches unrelated to international bodies, 19% in Roman Catholic churches, and 9% in churches related to the WCC (at least according to my unchecked calculations).

Which reminds me to urge care and caution in use of the *Encyclopedia*. It is dangerous when consulted for a quick statistical fix as one dashes off to class or rushes into print as I am recklessly doing here. This huge volume's statistics, definitions and percentages are not at all self-explanatory. They require study and constant reference to the book's own dictionary of definitions (Part 9) and its codebook for statistical tables (Part 6). Popular definitions differ widely and this book's usage of key words may not always

coincide with one's own, but it at least has the advantage of as clear an explanation as is briefly possible. As for the statistics, some of us without scientific background may need a refresher course in mathematics. Glaring mistakes of interpretation are easy to make. The columns are deceptively long. Take the editor's word for it and use a ruler. The footnotes and running words of instruction are interminable but indispensable. The *Encyclopedia* is not only almost as big as a computer, it is like a computer in this also: most of the mistakes I think I have found in it are not its own, but mistakes I have programmed into it by careless consultation.

### The Evangelical Surge

To return to the filaments of mission. The conciliar is not the only thread holding the churches of the world together and giving a coherent pattern to their missions. Much has been made by the media in recent years of the rising power of what it calls the evangelical sector (and more popularly, the "born again Christians") in American Protestantism. How true is the picture? Here again the *Encyclopedia* is a pace-setter in seeking to provide the data for identifying and analyzing the dimensions of a major ecclesiastical and missionary trend. In doing so, one feature that is sure to remain controversial is its separation of "evangelicals" into a measurable segment of global Christianity.

The *Encyclopedia* stands in a long line of Protestant statistical surveys stretching back to 1818, not to mention William Carey's in 1792. But I believe that this is the first time such a handbook has dared to distinguish "evangelicals" as a quantifiable world group. It gives the evangelical membership in the churches as 157 million (in 1980), and if all who claim to be evangelicals are included, the global total is recorded as 200 million. I assume that these figures include the 62 million membership, and 100 million global total of those who are designated elsewhere in the survey as "Pentecostal-charismatics," both inside and outside the Pentecostal denominations (pp. 826, 838).

If these figures are reasonably correct (which is all the *Encyclopedia* ever claims for its statistics), then they would be a highly significant confirmation of the world-wide nature of the evangelical surge. It would mean that more than half the affiliated membership of the world's Protestant churches are evangelicals (157 million out of 262 million, or 60%. (See Global Table 4, p. 8.)

It will be interesting to see how well these statistics stand up to further inquiry. The two problems needing attention are definition of the term "evangelical" and the reliability of the sources for numerical measurement. The *Encyclopedia's* own definition is four-fold, emphasizing personal religious experience, Scriptural authority, evangelism and theological conservatism. But not all who call themselves evangelicals consider all four characteristics as necessarily definitive, and even when they do, they do not always describe them in the same way. As for sources for the numerical statistics, few of the world's larger church bodies recognize and record a

separate "evangelical" category in their membership. National and global quantifications of such a classification, therefore, must depend heavily on public opinion polls, and these in turn hang upon the respondents' understanding of disputed terms. Nevertheless, I venture the prediction that if and when such a classification wins wide acceptance in the churches, as it has for example in the Anglican communion, the *Encyclopedia* will probably prove to be nearer right than wrong.

### Unreached Peoples

One of the most seriously studied areas of statistical missiological inquiry these days outside official conciliar circles is the task of identifying and evangelizing those peoples and areas still unreached by the missionary expansion of the Christian faith. Frontier missions, it is sometimes called. Here, too, the *Encyclopedia's* columns and charts and clarifying definitions of "evangelized, unevangelized and evangelizing populations" may stir up healthy debate and challenge to further research. Even more important, it could lead to renewed concern about unpenetrated parameters of the Christian mission's basic evangelistic task. The debate will probably center around the fact that the figures strongly suggest that "the dimensions of the unfinished task of world evangelization are in fact much smaller than contemporary Protestant and Catholic missionary organizations realize." The world, says the *Encyclopedia* boldly, was already 68% evangelized in 1980 and will be 72% evangelized by 1985 (p. 19). Even if so, it would mean that between a third and a quarter of the world's four billion four hundred million people will still be unevangelized.

Any debate stirred up on this issue must take seriously the book's precise definitions of terms, as found in its dictionary (esp. pp. 19 and 826). "Unevangelized" loosely used can mean anything from "never heard the name of Jesus" to "non-Christian." The editors use it in the sense of "not having had the gospel spread or offered" and provide columns of figures continent by continent, and even country by country, as well as two colored maps (pp. 798, 810-811, 868) to mark the location of the one billion three hundred and eighty million people not yet reached in 1980.

### The Growth of Third-World Churches

But for me, the most valuable and best defined segment of the data accumulated in this volume relates to the rise of what we usually call, for want of a better term, the third-world churches. Of all the varied filaments of mission which are forming the network pattern of the global church in the next hundred years, this will probably prove to be the most important. It was the *Encyclopedia's* startling observations on the growth of the non-white churches that first alerted many of us to the fact that a point of fundamental change of perspective has already been passed. The first chart in the book faces white Christians with the happy realization that sometime between 1981 and 1982 they lost their majority status in Christendom. For the first time in

1200 years the number of non-white Christians has again exceeded whites in the church around the world. Ours is no longer a "white man's religion." This basic trend is given further recognition in the survey by the designation of a whole new category of Christian churches. To the familiar trio of Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches, the *Encyclopedia* adds what it terms "Non-White Indigenous" churches. This is an awkward and uneven coupling of color and ecclesiastical history which separates two important segments of the churches in both the first and third worlds, but I must try to adjust my thinking to it because of its implications in mission to cultures and across cultures. In membership the new category already outnumbers the world-wide Anglican communion, 82 million to 50 million (Global Table 9, p. 14).

No separate classification exists of third-world churches or Christians as such, not an index of third-world countries. The precise definition used by the *Encyclopedia* for "third-world" is by political orientation: "non-aligned." But a world population chart highlights the sharp decline of the west's percentage of world population from 30% in 1900 to 14% in 1980, and the continuing population dominance of the third world despite its major loss to a suddenly emerging second (communist) world in this century. Third-world population began the century with 70% of the world's population in 1900, and still has 52% (p. 6).

A further help in identifying third-world missiological realities is the *Encyclopedia's* rearrangement of the traditional geographical context of mission. It abandons the old "five-continent" formula, and the newer "six-continent" world view of missions for the United Nation's more contemporary "eight-continent" division of the world's land area and peoples. By separating North America, Europe and the USSR from the other five "continents" (Africa, E. Asia, S. Asia, Latin America and Oceania), it provides missiologists with a reasonably approximate framework for separate statistical treatment of the third world and its major divisions. But it must be born in mind that "non-white indigenous" as a separate ecclesiastical category is not equivalent to "third world." The difference is perhaps best defined by two statistics in Table 9 (p. 14) on Global Membership in Organized Christianity. Non-White Indigenous church membership is given as 82 million in 1980, whereas church membership in "less developed countries" (a popular definition of the third world) is given as almost 600 million, or 45% of global church membership. The latter figure includes both types of third world churches, non-white indigenous and those with continuing western connections.

I find an extraordinary wealth of extremely useful material in the country by country descriptions and tables on the subject of the third world churches, all of it conveniently arranged for ready reference. We all have our areas of greatest interest. Mine is Asia. The *Encyclopedia* enables me to stand off for a moment from my preoccupation with one part of the globe to see Asia and its churches in context and proportion.

This produces some comparisons that are food for thought. It shows a major shift since 1900 of the center of Christian expansion, first from Europe to the Americas, then from the Americas to Africa. But most recently, that is from 1970 to 1980, the annual growth rate of Christianity in East Asia has been higher even than Africa, and South Asia has been very little behind Africa. Then there follows in a declining order of continental Christian growth rate Latin America, Oceania, the USSR, North America and lowest of all, Europe (Global Table 23, p. 782f.). It remains to be seen whether a ten-year period will be enough to indicate the trend of the future. For now, Asia is still the least Christian continent of all, both in the percentage of Christians in the population, and (if we exclude Oceania) in the total number of Christians.

But to put it all in final perspective, I must remind myself that these arrays of figures and statistics point only to the outward pattern, not to the inner truth of the Christian church in mission. That pattern is not really the faintly ominous, gigantic spider web of the astrophysicists' metaphor with which I began. To the Christian, would not a more appropriate metaphor be the globe of a great electric light. The *Encyclopedia* only traces the changing patterns of the filaments. That is its purpose and it does it very well. But the Light is Jesus Christ.